

BREAD MACHINES

Bread machines, while not new, are in their growth phase as a kitchen appliance. Their popularity with consumers is evidenced by the ever increasing number (over 30) of models on the market. This fact sheet is designed to assist the interested buyer. It will help you compare models and make an informed decision as to the best appliance for your individual needs.

The first consideration in deciding to purchase a bread machine should be to determine why you want one. Do you want one because your neighbor has one? Do you want it because you love the aroma of baking bread? Do you want it because you prefer freshly baked bread each day? Do you want it in order to control the ingredients in your bread? Whatever your reason for wanting a bread machine, be clear in your own mind as to why you are interested in purchasing it.

You need to be aware that bread machines produce a loaf that may be slightly smaller and in a different shape than a traditional loaf of home baked or commercially made bread. Machine loafs are generally tall with a rounded crown. Most bread machines use from one cup to a maximum of four cups of flour for one loaf of bread. In contrast, standard homemade bread recipes use four to eight cups of flour. The latter, however, produces two to three 5 x 9 inch loaves.

All bread machines come with recommended recipes that are compatible with the model's technology. For the best results, the directions must be followed for measuring and placing ingredients in the container. Other factors may impact the quality of your bread. These include air temperature, humidity and bread loaf cooling. Variations in air temperature and humidity can affect the volume and interior compactness of your loaf. Inadequate ventilation of steam from the cooling loaf will result in a gummy crust. Unless the machine has a cooling cycle, you need to be present at the end of the baking cycle to remove the hot bread from the machines.

The next step is to look at your bread usage habits and the value you place on home baked bread. How much bread does your household currently consume in a week? How much do you spend now on bread and bread products, including rolls? How often do you currently bake your own bread? How many loaves do you bake at a time? What special equipment, if any, do you use to make the bread? How much time does it take you to bake this bread? Compare these costs of time and money with the cost of the bread machine. Be sure to include the bread ingredients and the time involved in using the bread maker.

Next, compare the bread machines on the market. Not all bread machines are alike. Features differ among manufacturers and models. Figure 1 will assist you in comparison shopping. Check each model for versatility. Some models provide for baking more than one loaf size. Selecting a model with this choice gives the user more flexibility. Many models allow for several different flours such as white, whole wheat and rye for a variety of breads. Some deluxe models accommodate the baking of quick breads, sweet breads and pound cake. At least one model even allows you to make jam! Current prices of bread machines range from \$99 to \$400. While you're comparison shopping, check the price of electric mixers with dough hooks.

Now that you've done your homework, review the features and retail prices. Compare the cost of your preferred bread machine with the cost of a high wattage electric mixer that has a dough hook and two or three bread pans. Now look at the energy consumption of each appliance. For a fair comparison, add the energy required to bake the bread in a conventional household oven to the energy requirement of the electric mixer. Remember that the mixer and oven can produce more than one loaf at a time. Bread machines are limited to one loaf per cycle.

If you have completed all of the above steps, you should be ready to make your decision. In the final analysis, it comes down to getting the most for your investment. If you choose to purchase a bread machine, be aware that a variety of retail products and services are eagerly awaiting you. The food retail business is zeroing in on the bread machine market. Grocery stores now devote shelf space for a variety of bread mixes and supplies to be used in bread makers. There are also specialty cookbooks and newsletters available for bread machine owners to share their ideas with each other.

Whatever your decision, good luck and happy baking!

Figure 1

COMPARISON CHART FOR BREAD MACHINES

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